

## **Ladri di Biciclette**

**Bicycle Thieves** (Italian: **Ladri di biciclette**) is a 1948 Italian neorealist drama film directed by Vittorio De Sica. It follows the story of a poor father searching post-World War II Rome for his stolen bicycle, without which he will lose the job which was to be the salvation of his young family.

Adapted for the screen by **Cesare Zavattini** from a novel by **Luigi Bartolini**, and starring **Lamberto Maggiorani** as the desperate father and **Enzo Staiola** as his plucky young son, *Bicycle Thieves* received an Academy Honorary Award (most outstanding foreign language film) in 1950 and, in 1952 was deemed the greatest film of all time by Sight & Sound magazine's poll of filmmakers and critics; fifty years later another poll organized by the same magazine ranked it sixth among the greatest-ever films. The film was also cited by Turner Classic Movies as one of the most influential films in cinema history, and it is considered part of the canon of classic cinema.

Neorealism never got more real than in Vittorio de Sica's 1948 classic **Ladri di Biciclette**, or **Bicycle Thieves**. It turns out that there are two thieves: one at the movie's beginning, another at its end.

**Antonio (Lamberto Maggiorani)** is a poor man who is thrilled when he is at last offered a job: delivering and putting up movie posters. But he needs a bicycle, and must supply his own, so his wife **Maria (Lianella Carelli)** pawns the family's entire stock of bed linen to redeem the bicycle he had already hocked. On his first day at work, the unlocked machine is stolen and Antonio drops everything to go on a desperate odyssey through the streets of Rome with his little boy **Bruno (Enzo Staiola)** to get his bike back, pleading and accusing and uncovering scenes of poverty similar to theirs wherever they go. They create uproar in classic crowd moments: in the streets, in a market, in a church mass. Faces always gather avidly around the pair, all commenting, complaining and generally magnifying the father and son's distress.

This is a story that magnificently withholds the comic or dramatic palliatives another sort of film might have introduced. The son is the intimate witness of the father's humiliation, his inadequacy as a provider.

Antonio seems unable or unwilling to embrace the obvious redemptive moral - that his son is the important possession, not the wretched bicycle - and De Sica is unwilling to embrace it either, perhaps precisely because it is too obvious, or because this moral is a luxury that only well-off people can afford. The father is obsessed with finding a stolen needle in the urban haystack, obsessed with getting his job back. Again and again, he ignores his little boy while scanning the horizon for his bicycle. At one stage, he hears an uproar from the riverbank about a drowned boy. With a guilty start, he looks around. Do they mean Bruno? No: there he is, safe and sound.

But the lesson is not learned. He doesn't even hold Bruno's hand. And, in a later scene, we see the poor boy almost run over by a car because his father isn't looking out for him. Bruno's simple physical survival is the movie's secret miracle, and he is finally to be his father's saviour, but in such a way as to render Antonio's humiliation complete. This is poverty's authentic sting: banal and horrible loss of dignity. *Bicycle Thieves* is a brilliant, tactlessly real work of art.

Given an honorary Oscar in 1949, routinely voted one of the greatest films of all time, revered as one of the foundation stones of Italian neorealism, it is a simple, powerful film about a man who needs a job.

The story of *The Bicycle Thieves* is easily told. It stars Lamberto Maggiorani, not a professional actor, as Ricci, a man who joins a hopeless queue every morning looking for work. One day there is a job for a man with a bicycle. "I have a bicycle!" Ricci cries out, but he does not, for it has been pawned. His wife Maria (Lianella Carell) strips the sheets from their bed, and he is able to pawn them to redeem his bicycle; as he glances through a window at the pawn shop, we see a man take the bundle of linen and climb up a ladder to a towering wall of shelves stuffed with other people's sheets.

The bicycle allows Ricci to go to work as a poster-hanger, slapping paste on walls to stick up cinema advertisements (a large portrait of **Rita Hayworth** provides an ironic contrast between the world of Hollywood and the everyday lives of neorealism). Maria, meanwhile, goes to thank the Wise Woman, who predicted that Ricci would get a job. Ricci, waiting for her impatiently, finally leaves his bicycle at the door while he climbs upstairs to see what's keeping her; De Sica is teasing us, since we expect the bike to be gone when Ricci returns, and it's still there.

Then, of course, it is stolen, no doubt by another man who needs a job. Ricci and his small son Bruno (Enzo Staiola) search for the bicycle, but that's an impossible task in the wilderness of Rome, and the police are no help. Finally Ricci gives up: "You live and suffer," he tells Bruno. "To hell with it! You want a pizza?" In a scene of great cheer, they eat in a restaurant, Bruno even allowed to drink a little wine; the boy looks wistfully at a family eating platters of pasta, and is told by his father, "To eat like that, you need a million lira a month at least."

A little later, to his astonishment, Ricci spots the bicycle thief, and pursues him into a brothel. An ugly crowd gathers. A policeman arrives, but can do nothing, because there is no evidence and only Ricci as witness. And then, in the famous closing sequence of the movie, Ricci is tempted to steal a bicycle himself, continuing the cycle of theft and poverty.

Ricci is a character entirely driven by class and economic need. There isn't a lot else to him, although he comes alive in the pizzeria scene. True, the movie doesn't make a point of contrasting his poverty with high-living millionaires (wealth is illustrated as the ability to buy a plate of spaghetti).

**Vittorio De Sica** (1902-1974) was a handsome man, much in demand as an actor, whose first films as a director were light comedies like the ones he often worked in. Perhaps the harsh reality of World War Two jarred the optimism needed for such stories, and in 1942 he made "The Children are Watching," a film that came soon after Visconti's "Ossessione." The Visconti film, based on James M. Cain's hard-boiled novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is often named as the first of the neorealist films, although even in silent days there were films that boldly looked at everyday life in an unvarnished way.

De Sica and others often used real people instead of actors, and the effect, after decades of Hollywood gloss, was startling to audiences. Pauline Kael remembers going to see De Sica's first great film, "Shoeshine," in 1947, just after a lovers' quarrel that had left her in a state of despair: "I came out of the theater, tears streaming, and overheard the petulant voice of a college girl complaining to her boyfriend, 'Well I don't see what was so special about that movie.' I walked up the street, crying blindly, no longer certain whether my tears were for the tragedy on the screen, the hopelessness I felt for myself, or the alienation I felt from those who could not experience the radiance of 'Shoeshine.' For if people cannot feel 'Shoeshine,' what can they feel?"

**Neorealism**, as a term, means many things, but it often refers to films of working class life, set in the culture of poverty, and with the implicit message that in a better society wealth would be more evenly distributed. "Shoeshine" told the story of two shoeshine boys sent to reform school for black-marketeering; Kael's description of it could function as a definition of the hope behind neorealism: "It is one of those rare works of art which seem to emerge from the welter of human experience without smoothing away the raw edges, or losing what most movies lose--the sense of confusion and accident in human affairs."

"The Bicycle Thief," De Sica's next film, was in the same tradition, and after the lighthearted "Miracle in Milan" in 1951 he and Zavattini returned to the earlier style with "Umberto D," in 1952, about an old man and his dog, forced out onto the streets. Then, in the view of most critics, De Sica put his special gift as a director on hold for many years, turning out more light comedies ("Marriage, Italian Style," "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow"). The two important exceptions are "Two Women" (1961), which won Sophia Loren an Oscar for her portrait of a homeless woman during the war, and "The Garden of the Finzi-Continis" (1971), about an Italian Jewish family that tries to ignore the gathering clouds of doom. Both screenplays were by Zavattini.

This is a great film actually more about the people and the neighborhoods of this immense city of the period. Look closely at the relationship between the father and son and how it changes throughout the film. Look at how Bruno casts his gaze upon his father, whether he walks behind or in front and how that changes. Look at how differently we see the family of the thief.

On viewing the film the first thing that struck me was the poverty of post war Italy. The desperation was clearly etched in the faces of the men desperate for work. One forgets how

tragically poor Europe was at that time prompting many to depart their homelands for foreign soil.

The relationship between the father and son is at the core of the movie and was quite beautiful in its simplicity and depth. Any man with a young son could relate to those themes of desperation and the simple but powerful drive to hold your sons respect under such duress.

As the father feeds the son in the restaurant with the little money he has left over he says optimistically to the son “There’s an answer for everything except death”.

Notwithstanding its super-simple storyline – in postwar Rome, a bill-poster and his son search with increasing desperation for the former’s stolen bike, on which he depends for his new job – *Bicycle Thieves* is rich, subtle, powerful and – sadly – as relevant today in many ways as when it was made. Besides, as with any film worth its salt, it’s far, far more than just a story, and De Sica’s marvellously vivid images of evocative faces and cityscapes stick in the mind as indelibly as those of Federico Fellini or Michelangelo Antonioni.

#### **Reviews:**

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/dec/19/film-review-bicycle-thieves>

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2020/cteq/bicycle-thieves-vittorio-de-sica-1948/>